

A \$100,000 NECKLACE OF AMERICAN PEARLS

THE BLACK RIVER OF ARKANSAS BEING SWEEPED OF PEARL BEARING CLAMS \$2,000,000 WORTH ALREADY TAKEN OUT.

MORE than two million dollars' worth of pearls have been taken from the Black River, in Arkansas, and the inhabitants thereabouts have been made wealthy; but the river now is as clean of wealth as a whistle; pearling there is done. Barely a clam rests on the sandbars that stretch across the bottom of the stream, like the rungs of a giant ladder.

What is true of the Black River is rapidly becoming true of all the pearl bearing rivers in the Mississippi Valley. The pearling industry there is dying, and a business worth millions annually to the people of that section and a livelihood to a certain class of dealers in New York is declining. When it is entirely dead its obituary should be written by a dramatist, for no other person could do justice to the feverish excitement of its beginning, the humor and romance of its existence and the pathos of its ending.

In a country where \$16 a month for a laborer is excellent pay thousands have become independent and wealthy. Mortgages have been lifted, property has been developed, towns have been built up and whole communities and counties jumped to a place of pre-eminence in the social, political and commercial life of the State and section. This is particularly true of Arkansas, Wisconsin and Iowa.

Preserve the Clam.

The preservation of the clam, the source from which came all this wealth, has been entirely disregarded. The economic sense is lacking. Pearling has been carried on without method or reason; there is no law

A NECKLACE composed of more large pearls than any pearl necklace ever seen in the United States will leave New York this week for Paris. There it will be sold for \$100,000. From the French capital it will probably be sent to India and drilled. Then it will be brought back to the United States with an additional \$100,000 tacked on to the price and sold to a wealthy American. That is the way they do things in Europe, and it is a commercial feature the value of which has not yet been learned by the otherwise shrewd American.

It has long been a popular conception, fostered by jewellers, that the Oriental pearl is the only kind worth having. They are deceived. Pearls are daily coming into the United States from Paris and London that were found in the Black and White rivers of Arkansas and in the Mississippi. They go to Paris, which is the European market for pearls, and are sent from Paris to India. They are drilled in that faraway country, not because the drilling is any better there or done more cheaply, indeed in many cases it is not so cheap, but because India is a good place from which to have them billed back to London and the United States. It is a fact, which is daily becoming of more interest to pearl importers and domestic pearl dealers, that the largest pearls are found in the United States. The necklace in question, although containing forty-one pearls, weighs 1,335 grains, or an average of 47.2 grains per pearl. All the pearls in the string have been matched as to size, color and lustre, and it required more than four years' time on the part of a pearl expert to make the collection and assort them. Three of the pearls

in the necklace were purchased for \$10,000 each. Nothing like it has ever been seen by New York pearl dealers.

Necklace of Forty-One American Pearls, actual size.

times it is attached to the shell, but very frequently it is not, and great care is required to see that it is not lost in the process of boiling and assorting. The water in which they are boiled is carefully strained, and all of the meaty parts of the clam are pinched to see that a pearl is not missed.

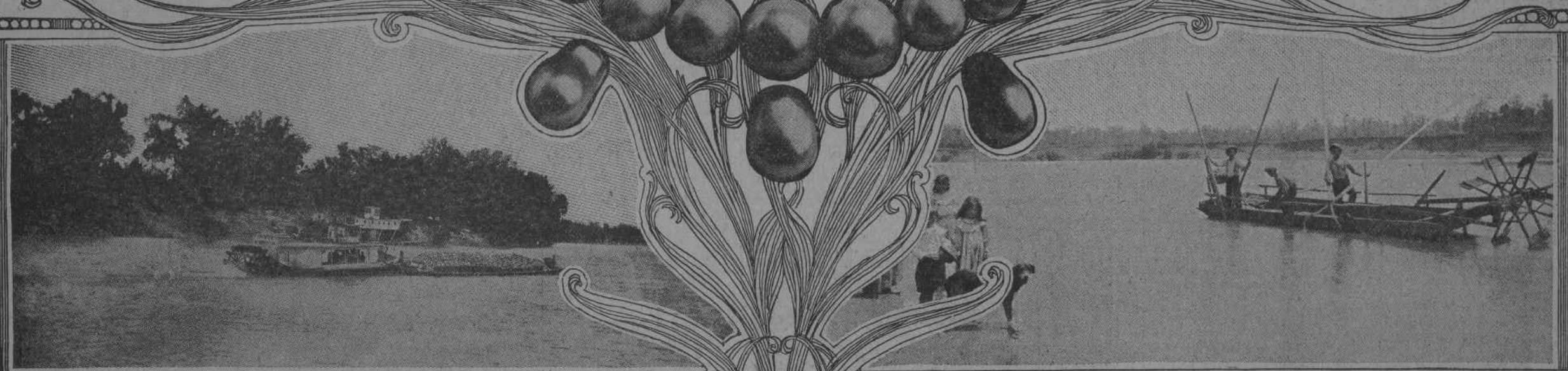
Although extremely commonplace in detail, the opening of a shell is attended with great emotions. Any one of the pile of clams before the pearler may contain a fortune for him. As he reaches for one after another of the bivalves hope bobs again into his heart, and as his hand, horny hand closes over the shell preparatory to opening it he feels a little thrill and his blood goes a little faster through his veins.

Comparatively New Industry.

Pearling as an industry in the United States is of comparatively recent origin, dating back to about 1887. Previous to that time there had been local outbreaks of the pearl fever in about every State of the Union. The first large pearl ever found in this country was picked up at Notch Brook, near Paterson, N. J., in 1857. It weighed ninety-three grains, and was sold by Tiffany & Co. to the Empress Eugenie.

The one pearl, however, was practically the limit to the New Jersey fields, though some smaller ones were afterward found in that State. Then occurred at broken intervals, from 1869 till 1887, excitement due to the discovery of the gem in Ohio, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Arkansas, along the Mississippi Valley and even up into New England and New York State. None of these so-called discoveries ever panned out, and after a brief local excitement the

GASOLINE DREDGING MACHINES TOWING LARGE SHELLS



WHITE CHAMBERS NEGOTIATING A "FIND" WITH A LOCAL BUYER

77 CLAMS ON THE HOOKS WHILE I WAS IN TIME TO GET



OUT-FIT AND STORE BINS BLACK RIVER

to regulate it. Any one at any time may fish as many clams from the water as he likes without regard to the size the apparatus he uses or the spawning season. Congress has tried to interfere and the Legislatures of States have been busy with measures regulating the industry, but without avail.

Fresh water pearls come in clams. They are formed by a nacreous substance poured on a grain of sand that gets into the shell. The clams are of all sizes and description, but they are usually about as large as a man's palm. The shell is thick and black and rough. They are found on all varieties of river bottoms from deep, thick mud to hard, white sand and gravel, and in all depths of water. The extent of the pearl country is large; it takes in the Mississippi River from La Crosse, Wis., to New Orleans and reaches out into the by-streams and tributaries of the big river for hundreds of miles.

Primarily, this territory is divided into two sections, each section has its market centre and around it are clustered the richest pearl fields. The northern centre is at Prairie du Chien, Wis. This centre is for Mississippi pearls and is the seat of the richest territory around. All pearls along the Mississippi River from La Crosse to Muscatine, Iowa, are brought here for appraisal and market.

Buyers from New York and Chicago hang about Prairie du Chien and the vicinity and pick up valuable pearls from local fishermen for a song. Afterward in the markets of Paris and London these bring immense prices. Because of this freehanded method of buying and selling there is no way of getting at the exact valuation of the output. The government has made some attempt to do so, but without much success.

Worth a Cou a's

Fishermen and local buyers report the buying and selling of pearls in the local market, but as a pearl that sells on the spot for \$1,000 or \$2,000 will bring when brought to New York and "touched up" from \$8,000 to \$12,000 nothing like a correct estimate can be made.

Maurice Brower, one of the largest buyers in the local markets, declared that the total production for 1901, which was the best year in the record of the industry, was more than \$1,500,000. Because of the falling off of the clam supply he said not more than \$500,000 or \$600,000 worth were found in 1902 and according to present indications 1903 would not produce much more than half that amount.

W. D. Burd, another local player, does

not make quite so generous an estimate, but as Mr. Burd rarely comes to New York he is not in quite as good a position to judge foreign market values. As an example of the range of prices of pearls it may be stated that about ten days ago a "button" shaped gem, found in the Mississippi, was sold in Prairie du Chien for \$1,428. Less than a week later it was in New York and the dealer was asking \$10,000 for it. If it were sent to Paris, the principal pearl market centre of the world, it would undoubtedly bring a much higher price.

The other pearl centre in the United States is at Newport, Ark. This city, which has been lifted from obscurity by the industry, is situated in the very heart of the richest pearl fields of the New World. More than three-fourths of the entire output to-day is found within a radius of thirty miles of there. It is the market for pearls found in the White River, which is producing practically all of the best found south of Prairie du Chien. The products of the fisheries have built its banks, laid out its streets and made wealthy its inhabitants. All the products of the Black River, the richest pearl river at one time in the United States, have passed through it.

ru e l e f o s

Pearling is strongly individualized. The method is crude and has changed little for centuries. It is usually carried on by two men in a skiff, with the aid of tongs or shoulder rakes. The tongs are about seven or eight feet long, and are operated like oyster tongs. The fisherman gropes along the bottom of the stream with them, pulling up whatever gets into them. The rake is operated in much the same way. The instrument is something like an ordinary garden rake, only larger and has a longer handle.

A wire screen from the top of the rake prongs is attached to the handle, forming a sort of scoop. The rake is dragged along the ground, catching clams and other things. When it is full it is pulled to the surface, and its contents dumped into the skiff. Both of the methods are extremely laborious, and can only be employed where the water is shallow and where the clams are found in thick beds.

A much easier way to gather the clams, and one that is in more favor with the Mississippi fishermen than with the Arkansas pearl hunter, is to fish for them with "crowfoot" hooks. These hooks are made with stout wire, small chains and a hollow tube rod. The wire is bent into eight hooks, and attached to the small



chains in such a way that the prongs of long, at regular distances apart. The number of hooks to be attached depends upon the length of the rod. A seven foot rod, with four hooks on each chain, the rod, which is either seven or eight feet

long, is attached to the handle, forming a sort of scoop. The rake is dragged along the ground, catching clams and other things. When it is full it is pulled to the surface, and its contents dumped into the skiff. Both of the methods are extremely laborious, and can only be employed where the water is shallow and where the clams are found in thick beds.

The "Crowfoot" Dredge After rowing out into the stream the fisherman throws his "crowfoot" apparatus overboard and allows the boat to slowly drift down stream. As the numerous prongs come in contact with the open shells, the latter quickly close on them and retain a tight hold. After drawing a short distance the dredge is drawn in by means of a rope attached and the clams removed from the prongs, great force sometimes being required to dislodge them.

In order to facilitate the handling of the crowfoot the fishermen fasten two upright forks on each side of the boat, on which the dredge rod rests, the hooks swinging freely. While the clams are being taken from the hooks, the other is being dragged and is ready to be hauled in by the time the first is stripped.

Often when the clams are abundant every hook will have one on it, and two or three and some times four are frequently caught on one prong. When the beds are compact one man can take eight hundred to a thousand pounds of mussels in a day, and a case is reported where two thousand two hundred pounds were obtained by one man in ten hours. The average daily catch, however, is about six hundred pounds.

When a boatload of clams has been obtained or when night comes the fishermen rows ashore and dumps his catch into bins built on the bank of the stream. After he has obtained a sufficient number of shells, or when the weather is stormy and disagreeable on the river, he boils them out. This is done by shovelling them into a large metal boiler and building a fire beneath.

"Boil it Out."

The boiling out process requires only a short time and is for the purpose of opening the clams so that the pearls may be found. When they are thoroughly cooked the shells spring open and expose the clam. The pearl is found in the muscle of the clam or between it and the shell. Often

bubble invariably burst. In the Mississippi section, however, there was always a well grounded feeling that pearls were plentiful there.

Until the Black River gems began to be put into circulation the American variety had never borne much of a reputation, and the popular prejudice against them has not yet been entirely dispelled. As the Arkansas gems found their way to Paris, however, it was seen that they compared favorably with the famed Oriental variety. Indeed, in some few cases they excelled. And since then the European dealer has been quick to take advantage of the low price. He has also taken advantage of the popular prejudice of the wealthy American, who believes that everything that is absolutely correct and artistic must come through the European market.

Spurious Oriental Pearls.

He will purchase the domestic product at a ridiculously low figure and send them to India, where they are drilled and returned again to Paris, stamped as Oriental pearls. Being thus classified, it was easy to pass them on Americans travelling abroad at exorbitant prices. Even New York importers have been large buyers of these pearls, believing them to be Oriental. Domestic dealers in New York have seen American pearls placed on display for sale in some of the big jewelry stores while the owners of the stores themselves thought they were the genuine Oriental. The dealer would know for a fact because he would recognize some of the very pearls he had sold to a Paris merchant months before.

Arkansas pearls are as a general thing much larger than the Oriental specimens, and while they will not run as well as a lot or "paper" some few gems are superior in color lustre and size. Mississippi pearls are poorer in quality and size than the Southern or Arkansas gems and are not found as plentifully.

Meanwhile some few rich discoveries are being made in the Cumberland River, in Kentucky, and in the Ohio, which hitherto have been very backward in this respect. Undoubtedly the rivers of the Mississippi Valley will continue to produce pearls for centuries to come, but they will turn out such poor specimens and they will be so few that dealing for them can hardly be called an industry. And unless something in the way of legislation is done very soon the present industry will turn out to be a bubble similar to all of those that have gone before.